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1968/10/31

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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Thurs., Oct. 31, 1968
5:20 p. m.

LITERALLY EYES ONLY

MR. PRESIDENT:

Herewith a terse version of the
briefing memorandum. You will wish,
of course, to look at it most carefully
to see if it has all the elements you want.

Walt Rostow

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Briefing Memorandum

On the basis of recent developments in the Paris talks, I have just issued orders to stop the bombing of North Vietnam. As I have said since my talk at San Antonio a year ago, I would do so if I had reason to believe that the cessation of bombing would result in prompt and productive talks and the other side would not take advantage of that cessation.

As I have told the Presidential candidates several times, the formula that I have put to the other side consistent with these principles is the following:

The President could not maintain a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam unless it were very promptly evident to him, to the American people, and to our allies, that such an action was, indeed, a step toward peace. A cessation of bombing which would be followed by

- abuses of the DMZ;
- Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacks on cities or such populated areas as provincial capitals;
- or a refusal of the authorities in Hanoi to enter promptly into serious political discussions which included the elected government of the Republic of Vietnam, could simply not be sustained.

We have good reason to believe these facts of life are now understood in Hanoi. The Soviets have told us when we questioned them very hard that any doubts we might have about the position of the North Vietnamese with respect to these three conditions are "without foundation."

Meanwhile the battlefield situation since August has shifted heavily in our favor; the cost of a bombing cessation in North Vietnam has been reduced because of the weather; and weather conditions make the DMZ much less vulnerable than in mid-summer. For, say, the next 90 days.

Ambassadors Harriman and Vance have put these conditions lucidly to the other side on 12 occasions in Paris. They are sure that they are understood. They believe that it is the intent of Hanoi to honor them.

My other advisers believe it is ~~more~~ more likely than not likely that they will honor them.

In any case, Gen. Abrams has been issued standing orders to respond to violations of the DMZ, and all of us in the government are prepared to resume the bombing in the face of gross, purposeful violations.

Sect. Rusk and Sect. Clifford and General Wheeler have all recommended this course of action to me. I polled the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff individually on October 14. They concurred unanimously, as did General Palmer, who had long experience in Vietnam.

Because of his long experience with air operations in Vietnam, I asked General Momyer for his recommendation. It was positive. When I put the question of whether we should go to Gen. Abrams, his response was, "It is the right thing to do."

General Taylor and Mr. Helms also strongly support this course.

In mid-October President Thieu and the Chiefs of the Troop Contributing Countries gave their concurrence to this proposition. Since that time, we have been engaged in negotiations in both Paris and in Saigon to settle certain details. Tonight President Thieu informed me that he would join fully in this decision. The GVN will be free to join the talks next Wednesday, November 6. They are now organizing the delegation, and we shall be working out in Paris the ground rules for those talks.

Let me summarize the understanding we have reached with Hanoi:

-- Hanoi has agreed to begin serious talks toward peace in Vietnam -- talks which would include representatives of the Government of South Vietnam.

-- We have made it clear to them that a continuation of the bombing cessation was dependent, first, on respect for the DMZ, and second, upon there being no attacks on the cities.

-- The Soviet Union, which has played a part in this negotiation, knows these circumstances intimately. Their understanding has been reaffirmed at the highest level in the last few days.

-- Both Hanoi and Moscow are clear that we shall continue reconnaissance of North Vietnam. That is why we agreed to stop only acts of force and not acts of war.

The agreement at which we have arrived is, then, precisely the one which -- as I have told all three Presidential candidates -- we have been seeking in recent months. We have given away nothing to reach this agreement. It is wholly consistent with my public statements.